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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOK CLAIMS INTENT TO EXPAND SUFFRAGE, WELCOMES
TRAINING FOR JUDGES

Classified By: ADCM John G. Moran for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: On July 26, the Ambassador met with the new government's Minister of Justice, Ahmed Baquer Al-Abdullah, who gave him a readout on some of the governments upcoming plans. Among the specific items discussed were the GOK's commitment to womens suffrage, the possible lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 and the possibility of USG-provided training for Kuwaiti judges. End Summary.

EXPANDING THE VOTE

12. (C) During their July 26 meeting, the Ambassador and Minister of Justice Ahmed Baquer Al-Abdullah discussed the expansion of voting rights in Kuwait. Baquer said that while the government was committed to resubmitting a proposal to expand suffrage to women (Note: The last proposal was voted down by the National Assembly in 1999. End Note.), he was doubtful that the GOK would gain the necessary 32 votes for passage from the new National Assembly. As if to prove the point, Baquer then proceeded to read the names of every National Assembly Member and their suspected and/or known position on the issue, adding that the GOK would only be able to secure 27 votes (Comment: Baquer, the only elected MP in the new Cabinet, is a Salafi Islamist. He retains the Justice portfolio he held in the last Cabinet, but no longer holds the Awqaf and Islamic Affairs portfolio. End Comment.)

13. (C) Noting that there were other ways to expand the electoral base, the Ambassador suggested that the GOK might also consider dropping the voting age from 21 to 18 and allowing the military and security personnel to vote. In the case of women's suffrage, it should consider challenging the election law as unconstitutional (Note: Kuwait's constitution guarantees the equality of all citizens, although many of its laws make distinctions between men and women. End note.). Baquer replied that lowering the voting age had been discussed since the 1970's, and there was a general societal consensus that "18 is too young." With respect to the military, he said Kuwait has a tradition of keeping the military out of politics, and would likely not find such an expansion acceptable. Finally, Baquer called GOK legal action against the law "a big problem," because many of Kuwait's laws differentiate between men and women. "Islamic Sharia," which Kuwait's laws are partially based upon, "always distinguishes between men and women," he said.

14. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that the Constitution stated Sharia was "a basis," i.e not the only basis, for Kuwaiti law. Elections and other laws not directly adapted from Sharia should be changed to comply with the Constitution. Baquer said this was one example of the challenge facing the Islamic world. "The Islamic world needs to choose between the East or West," he said. Completely ignoring the issue of constitutionality, he added, "The West doesn't distinguish between men and women at all." Later, attempting to explain the fact that Kuwait is the last voting country in the world that still has not extended the vote to women, Baquer said Islamic scholars had opposed womens suffrage in Muslim countries, but "it was imposed on them."

JUDGE TRAINING WELCOMED

15. (C) The Minister was much more open to the Ambassador's offer of USG assistance in providing Kuwait's judges with training on internationally accepted standards, especially for the protection of intellectual prooerty rights. Baquer called such training "a good idea" and said the issue should be taken up again after the current 3-month judiciary holiday is over.

COMMENT

16. (C) Before the election, Shaykh Sabah, who is now Prime Minister, publicly pledged a fresh push on women's rights. The clear opposition of his own Justice Minister shows what an uphill struggle it will be.

JONES